

# A good teacher can change your life

by Jen Stout



## St Petersburg

Jen Stout with her Russian teacher Yulia, 2007.

Photo: Jen Stout

**A** good teacher can change your life. And teachers who can recognise talent in the sullen and furious kids are particularly important. Early on in high school I'd come to see my six years at the Anderson as a sentence that just had to be served and then swiftly forgotten. The days alternated between chaos and boredom in classrooms; the time between periods just a minefield of physical threats and bullying. I learnt while studying at home in the evenings, not at school. I'd enthusiastically taken up smoking at 13, a very necessary tactic to stop getting beaten up. Once you're sent flying through a front door in Queen's Lane, snapping collarbone and yale lock alike, you take some drastic measures. It worked, by the way. Worth a lifelong addiction to nicotine? Maybe.

So, come 4th year and I'd usually be found down the infamous 'slope'. Like the official social areas, smoking haunts at the Anderson were strictly segregated by year. Round the back of the music block was just for young ones - always the risk of food landing on you from the Home Economics windows above. So I skived a fair bit, and if I did make it to a class, I'd be at the back, scowling, in the same black hoodie I always wore, surreptitiously listening to Nirvana. I was supremely sarcastic, to cover the fact that I

was very unhappy. But the cover worked, and teachers and pupils alike largely left me to it.

Then I noticed Russian was an option in 5th year. I think I was drawn to it just because it was so different. French and German never did much for me; I strongly objected to the illogical (as I saw it) French spelling. So I sloped in to that first Russian class, B3 corridor, just a handful of us. And I just lit up. From the instant Marion Ockendon started teaching me Russian, I loved the language so much it felt

physical - a tight balloon of joy and excitement in my chest. I soaked up the grammar, the phonetics, the beautiful way the letters were formed: the resonant rolled R, soft sshhhhs. There are two different versions of 'Sh'! What a language.

Russian, somehow, was deeply familiar; even at that early stage, it felt more natural in my mouth than English or Shetland (perhaps unsurprising, caught uncomfortably between those two as I was). A huge curiosity grew and grew; I wanted to know everything, politics and history, culture and songs, to do with this country, which quickly became almost mythical in my mind.

Marks in my other classes improved, as Russian study became a 'reward' once I'd done the other homework. I remember copying out the sloping Cyrillic script at night, filling pages and pages, and taking it to show my teacher, trying not to show how pleased I was at her praise as she flicked through half a jotter's worth of writing. Mrs O was a brilliant teacher. Firm and fair and calm, she was also a listening ear for struggling pupils, and I worked hard, not wanting to disappoint her. I felt she could see through my prickly facade, and was frankly relieved that a grown-up had managed to do so.

So alongside the Nirvana and Staind posters

in my bedroom, I stuck up handwritten grammar tables, and made my way through Russian's six glorious grammatical cases. And then Mrs O began talking about a school trip.

## School trip

I'd been on two school trips away from Shetland before. The awful, ill-fated spew bug trip to Scotland, made in the late 90s by bairns from the peerie isles (the image of a mountain of stained bedsheets in the foyer of the Aberdeen youth hostel has stuck with me, and no doubt with the teachers too). Then there was a trip to Norway on the *Norröna* while at Bressay school, which featured a similar amount of spewing, and relentless bullying, with some nice mountain views in between. So by 5th year, I was ready for a better trip.

It must have been some feat of organisation. We bag-packed at the supermarket. We got sponsorship from Shetland Catch - resulting in some fantastic t-shirts. But the flights to St Petersburg weren't cheap. I wasn't sure I'd be able to go, but my great uncle Harry chipped in. Folk will remember him from the British Legion, Harry Isbister, though he died about ten years ago. I'll always be very grateful to him; the trip was such an experience. Imagine - just a teenager, most of your growing up done in Fair Isle, you've never been abroad (I'm ignoring Norway, because it was awful) and suddenly you're looking down at a sprawling, industrial foreign city unfolding beneath you, from a banking plane, clutching your passport sweatily.

The last of the winter's snow was still on the ground; St Petersburg's great rivers and canals still frozen over. But we'd come just in time for the thaw, and I vividly remember the creaking noise which seemed to permeate the city: the huge plates of ice breaking up in the Neva and Fontanka. There was the ever-present danger of enormous icicles falling from tall buildings, nearly impaling pedestrians. It was all utterly foreign. I must have resembled that chipmunk character in *Ice Age* - eyes wide as saucers - trying to read every massive advertisement hoarding, pick up scraps of Russian conversation, trying to take it all in.

Five pupils, and Mrs O - plus Evelyn Rae, the PE teacher. I didn't have to consider the logistics at all - God, wasn't it great to be teenager! - but remember that we spent a lot of time walking round the city. I took a million photographs, some of which are on my wall in Voe now - the bursting cherry blossom framing the pale blue grandeur of the palace at Peterhof; the city's red rooftops from the top of St Isaac's Cathedral; a tall tenement ripped open on Nevsky Prospekt, each flat opened up to the sky, half-intact rooms just hanging there. I just couldn't believe half the stuff I was seeing.

It was an interesting time to be in Russia, the



### Chimney stacks dominate the St Petersburg skyline, 2005.

*Photo: Jen Stout*

mid-2000s. A lot of it was beyond my teenage understanding, but I remember the underpasses were lined with people flogging stuff - pirated CDs in particular. I was over the moon, as even I could afford these - I got two Beatles CDs, badly-printed liner notes sticking out round the edges. The plonky piano and bass of Octopus's Garden are still melded on to St Petersburg, in my mind. But then there were straggling lines of old, hunched-over people, knick-knacks spread out on a handkerchief on the dirty pavement. It was deeply shocking, these women older than my own grandmothers, holding out books and cutlery. I felt ashamed, walking past them.

I have a photograph I took early one morning from the balcony of my room that week, far up in a high-rise flat. The picture is dark. Steely-grey sky above and black rows of identical towers below. But a wedge of light is breaking between city and sky; a great split of sunrise, dazzling orange and already made smoky by the huge, reeking chimney stacks. I was totally entranced by the view, the skyline, and the scale. I probably hadn't been in such a high flat before. It belonged to a host family - the sweet Lyuba and her two daughters - and to get to it, you walked to one of the huge, hulking concrete blocks on Novosmolenskaya Embankment, right out on the edge of Vasilevsky Island, then up in a tiny, shaky lift. Exactly the same block repeated all the way to the sea. Across the wide canal a lower, horizontal concrete block ran the entire length. The scale was just staggering. I had no idea how I'd find the right building if I was by myself - everything was dizzyingly similar. But though it felt overwhelming, I loved the symmetry and scale, the boldness of it all. I loved the vast skyline, the red-white-striped chimney towers belching smoke, and the grand facades, cracked and shabby in the spring thaw.

Most of all though, I loved the metro. I'd always had a thing for trains - the lure of the exotic! - but this was beyond even my beloved Intercity Express. A network so comprehensive, so beautifully logical



### Woman on ice

Sunset on the Smolenska River, St Petersburg, 2005.

Photo: Jen Stout

with its colour-coding and interchanges. Finding our route on the map became my favourite game; and of course the grandeur, the total madness of those stations took my breath away. St Petersburg's metro is deep, deep underground because of the city's swamp land. When I stepped on the first escalator I felt the tug of vertigo, peering down to find the stairway's end - minute, distant. You stand, trundling, for minutes and minutes, descending for hundreds of feet. Sometimes another, deeper escalator follows the first, and I'd feel like this was surely some sci-fi movie, some alternate universe; how could it possibly be safe to go so far underground?

## Tea with lemon

But actually, even more than futuristic metro stations and ice-bound canals, it was Russian people that became firmly lodged in my heart. In the flat on Novosmolensky, Lyuba spoke little English but was kindness itself, showering us with incomprehensible love. She was so delighted when, one morning, I showed her a photo of my little sister that when we said goodbye Lyuba pressed presents for Freya into my hands: a purple toy dinosaur, a novelty pencil. She had tears in her eyes. With our teachers at the language school we attended for a week, it was the same - this huge, utterly sincere warmth. I could drop my guard a little; sarcasm suddenly seemed less necessary. One morning I had to miss a lesson and apologised profusely, horribly embarrassed - but the teacher assured me it would make little difference because I was learning so fast. 'You have Russian eyes' she said, beaming, as if that settled it.

The other moment that stuck with me forever - oh, ego - was when I managed to order 'tea with lemon' in a cafe. My Russian was still so poor that producing words was a struggle - plus, I was often struck by shyness. But stuttering out *chai s-limonom, pozhaluista* and actually being understood was a crowning

achievement of the whole trip. The words sort of lit up, green-neon, in my mind, the instrumental case joining 'chai' and 'limon' with preposition and declension. It was like a high, that rush of joy that comes with speaking and understanding a foreign language. I still get it, studying grammar today, as I get ready to go back to Russia. Still think of a cup of tea, slice of lemon floating in it, when I use the instrumental case.

We walked back from the cafe to our digs and stopped on a bridge over the river, to see the sun setting over the huge expanse of ice. Ice not much longer: water was pooling on the surface, great cracks creeping through it. And a tiny old lady, hunched over, was crossing the thawing ice. I watched, horrified, until she made it to the other side and carried on home, clutching shopping bags in either hand. My awe of Russian women continued to grow.

Safe to say I did not want to leave. I'd decided - well before the lemon incident - that this was my future: chasing that high of language acquisition, learning and learning about this place till I could cram in no more. I would go to university, and come back here.

## White nights

I was 20 when I got to St Petersburg again, arriving in late June. Just in time for their simmer dim, the 'white nights' of this northern city. I sat watching this grand display of pastel pinks and blues, late at night, leaning on the huge stone lion carved into the embankment of the Neva river, smoking my new favourite Russian cigarettes. 'Peter the First', about 15p a pack. I felt so free I could have shouted with happiness; a giddy, bubbling-up kind of joy. The years between that first trip and this one had not been easy. On landing at Sumburgh back then, I'd found that I had moved house while away, as my parents had split up again. More moves followed, but finally, at 20, I was a student, broke but independent, and over the moon.

We had a month there, at a language school. Wouldn't it be fun, I'd said to a classmate, to make the whole journey from Edinburgh to St Petersburg by train. She gave me a look that said, no, that would not be fun. I pressed on. Aside from trains being better for the climate, imagine the romance of a night-train across the Lithuanian border! We'd take a picnic, a bottle of wine, watch the landscape change in the glow of a northern summer (etc, etc). I also proposed sleeping in the houses of total strangers - 'couchsurfing' - to save money and meet locals. Before the idea was monetised and turned into that community-destroying epidemic called 'Airbnb', couchsurfing was a brilliant way to get around. To my complete surprise, Natascha cautiously agreed, and I set about booking the quite

complicated train routes that would take us through Paris, Warsaw and Vilnius.

It's fair to say I was the more enthusiastic partner on this convoluted journey. We did land on our feet with the hosts: a palatial apartment in Warsaw, taken out to eat steak by the civil servant hosting us, and in Vilnius more of the same - hospitality, generosity, drinking. But we were brought thudding down to earth by Russian bureaucracy at about three in the morning, just over the border. Lights pinged on in the third-class carriage ('platzcart' - a glorious tangle of bunks, feet, vodka bottles, bedsheets, open from one end to the other). Heavy boots thudded through the compartment, and a man in uniform was demanding our passports. They were taken away in a little wooden box, and it was a sickening wait to get them back, blinking under the lights. Finally, they were returned by another grim-faced officer. I wanted to laugh because their enormous military hats were so comical, but I thought better of it. Welcome to Russia!

In St Petersburg, I quickly abandoned the host family I'd been put with, largely due to their son, who would appear drunk each night, clad in black leather jacket, face like thunder, and storm around the apartment shouting at his elderly parents. I felt guilty about leaving; it wasn't their fault their son was horrible, and hosting foreign students for a language school probably brought in quite a lot of money. For three weeks I moved from one shabby hostel to another - no mosquito nets on the windows, so that by the end of the month my arms and legs were a map of weeping sores, and I woke at the slightest hint of that high-pitched buzzing, slapping my hands around wildly. One hostel was an old communal apartment - on the wall of one huge room you could clearly read the sloping Cyrillic script: 'Communalnaya Kwartira Nomer 36'. It was opposite the house that Dostoevsky had lived in, which was cool, but I was more concerned about whether I could make toast on the hob's single gas flame (no), or whether the ancient shower would ever work. I don't think the apartment had changed in any way at all since its days as Number 36, other than a lot of cheap bunks being installed. I was probably lucky to see it like that - such a 'hot' location will no doubt be rows of luxury flats now.

I spent a month there, and I think I was happy, though I was still just a kid, overwhelmed by a big foreign city. I'd trek miles to an internet cafe for 15 minutes' precious 'surfing' time (imagine this, now!) and send emails to my mum about the terrible cold I had, the landlady's awful son, the mosquito bites. A few days later I'd go back and find a funny, warm, encouraging reply from mum - recounting horror stories of when she was travelling at my age, which made my woes seem manageable. She could always make me laugh at my predicament; it was one of the loveliest things about her.

## Learning Russian

As a student, my actual progress in Russian language was frustratingly slow - tuition at Edinburgh was a bit lacking, and at the language school over the summer it was little better. Everything progressed only as quickly or as slowly as the worst student, so it felt like pulling teeth, and I just wanted to speed ahead. But it was in the university library, among the stacks, that I learnt the most. I haunted the Russian section, taking huge delight in the fact that I could just pick up any book that took my fancy and read it. One of these was Evgenia Ginzburg's *Into the Whirlwind*: the first part of a memoir by a lecturer in Kazan. She was caught up in the 1937 purges and sent to the gulag.

It's an extraordinary book. In the wagons, trundling slowly out to the camps, the academic keeps up the spirits of her fellow convicts by reciting epic poems and stories. I decided, on reading this, that I should memorise as much poetry as I could - just in case. And the poems did come in useful when I was, very briefly, in police cells without a book to read, and I still remember them now. Osip Mandelstam's 'Eyesight of Wasps'. Boris Pasternak's 'To Love Others'. I tried to memorise the famous 'Requiem' by Anna Akhmatova, the definitive poem of Soviet-era dissent. I never managed - it's very long - but the preface stayed with me. Anna is queueing with other women at the prison walls, in the freezing cold, hungry and desperate for news of their husbands and sons. One woman recognises Anna, and whispers this most fundamental question: 'Can you describe this?'. I couldn't forget this, because it seemed to encapsulate everything about writing, whether poetry or journalism - can you describe what's happening? Beautifully, or sparsely, but creating a record, so that it can't be forgotten. It's a challenge too - will you describe this? It reminds us of a writer's role in society.

These romantic, perhaps rather melodramatic ideas of writing and of Russia probably still shape my aspirations. After that summer in St Petersburg, I'd spend more than a decade trying to find ways to move to Russia, thwarted at every turn. First there was the much-anticipated 'year abroad' in Perm, part of the university degree, and my boyfriend was even learning Russian so he could come with me - but then the crushing blow: you had to pay £1,500 for the trip. Some of it would be reimbursed the next year, but I just had nowhere near that kind of money. I mean - at that time I probably had about a tenner. I lived on baked tatties. The Russian department's director was unmoved. 'We've never had this problem before', I remember her saying. So I had to switch degrees - across to Sociology. Hearing my former classmates' tales of volunteering with human rights campaigners in Perm was hard to bear. But I ploughed on with Sociology, and before

I even put on the silly cloak and processed through McEwen Hall for graduation, I'd arranged the next chapter: a job as an English language assistant at a university in the Urals. I had the papers ready by the end of the summer, and even saved up enough to buy a big warm Swedish coat, half price on Ebay.

But mum fell ill that summer, and for some reason the doctors in Lerwick couldn't say, or couldn't be bothered to work out, what was wrong with her, and by the time they belatedly realised it was cancer, it was far too late. Instead of Russia, I went back to Bressay to help out. No offence to Bressay, but it wasn't much of a swap.

## Further attempts

Further attempts followed over the years: I'd always been entranced by a Russian village called Kitezh, built in the 90s to provide an alternative to state orphanages. Volunteers could go there, teaching English, digging tatties, living with the foster families and pitching in with community life. I'd been missing community life since we left Fair Isle, and I loved the idea of a Russian village. But three months there cost £1,500. I tried again and again, filling in the forms, asking if they could make a concession (they could not), trying to save up. But I earned next to nothing during these years, and £1,500 is a hell of a lot of money.

When I started working as a journalist all thoughts of travel and dreams had to be quashed for a few years of hard graft, moving round the UK for reporting jobs and training, broke as ever, till I somehow kicked the door down and got a job at the BBC. I wasn't just overly keen on sitting in a Glasgow office doing TV, and constantly scoured the wires for jobs in Russia. I took myself off to Ukraine on holiday, in November 2019. It was freezing, obviously, and quite dark, and I spent the whole time talking to investigative journalists and activists about the situation in that country, and visiting museums about the Holodomor famine, the war, and Chernobyl. Not everybody's idea of a relaxing break, and admittedly quite exhausting. But I loved Kyiv, and wrote to the editor of a newspaper there, brass-necked and asking for a job. A while later this tactic actually worked, but by then I'd been offered a place on a prestigious two-month journalism programme in Germany, which I felt I couldn't turn down. In retrospect, I was being too sensible. I was often too sensible; I worried too much about letting people down, or running out of money, or appearing ungrateful. I should have been more daring, more selfish. Life is short.

'I'm going to Russia soon' became a sort of mantra, a running joke among my friends. Oh, Jen? Yeah, she's going to Russia. ... But I wasn't. I couldn't find a (sensible) way. I compiled long lists of foreign correspondents in Moscow. How did they start out

there, what was their 'break'? It was a depressing list. I noted all their universities: overwhelmingly, they went to Oxbridge often followed by a post-grad in journalism at the eye-wateringly expensive City University. Even then, the spell abroad which let them 'break in' often seemed to involve relatives supplying flats, cash, introductions with the right people. It looked like a completely closed shop.

What I did have, though, was an uncanny ability to get onto scholarships, fellowships and funding schemes. I'd got my journalism training paid for through a diversity fund; won their work placement at the *New Statesman* at the end of it; got research council funding for a four-year PhD (long story: suffice to say I don't have a PhD); went to Leipzig for two months on a fellowship; now I was going to use this skill to get to Russia.

In 2020, finally, this plan came to fruition. It was early March that I got the email offering me an Erasmus scholarship: a two-year Masters programme that would take me to Estonia, Russia and Ukraine. I was ecstatic. I'd been jogging (lockdown did strange things to us all) near Glasgow university every evening, and that night I looked up at it, lit up with floodlights on the hill, all spires and cloisters, and I thought - they're letting me in! I felt like Jude the Obscure. But it wasn't the only good news. A few months earlier, I'd been to the strangest interview of my life.

It was in a Mayfair hotel, the kind so posh that the walls are cushioned. I wheeled my bike off the sleeper train and cycled, haphazardly, across London. The foyer of the hotel was the world's most surreal theatre stage. I could've watched them all for hours. Terribly proper English ladies sipped tea in a corner, wearing little hats and the strangely dowdy clothes of real 'old money' - or perhaps just dowdy next to the American guests, who kept striding through the lobby, literally dripping with jewellery, exclaiming loudly over the decor with that amazing American lack of self-awareness. The ladies cast horrified glances at them. A Russian couple, in furs, turned up with a huge husky dog. I felt very scruffy in my old, second-hand skirt and jacket, tights probably marked with bike chain grease, red in the face from cycling.

The interviews and Russian tests took most of the day. A committee of Russians and Americans, and the odd Brit, grilled me on my intentions and commitment as a journalist and a Russophile, and I held forth happily, and walked away thinking: that was fun, but I haven't got a hope in hell. I almost forgot about it, going straight back to long, late hours in the slog of TV news production.

So it was surreal, in March 2020, to be accepted onto both programmes. I was inclined to take the university scholarship - I missed academia, and the prospect of just reading, writing, learning and travelling for two years was intoxicating. It took

about a week before I re-read the small print, and it all came crashing down. A funny quirk of Erasmus scholarships, it turns out, is that the bursary only covers time spent abroad. For the nine months I'd spend at Glasgow university - nothing. Not a penny. I asked the lecturers what on earth students were meant to do. Stay with parents, came the inevitable reply.

At least this made the decision easier. Moscow fellowship it was - nine months long, and actually fully funded. Such generous schemes are like hens' teeth - almost always there's some catch which means you really need wealthy parents to help out - but this one seemed like the answer to all my hopes and dreams. I started preparing for a June departure.

Of course, this was spring 2020, when everything - the world over - came crashing to a halt. I had to just laugh at the way life pans out. After 15 years of trying to get to Russia, my one big chance was now screwed. I couldn't even leave Glasgow, let alone the country. Borders slammed shut and the programme was postponed.

That was more than a year ago. The programme has been postponed another four times since then, with each twist of the pandemic bringing more bad news for hopeful travellers. Of course, compared to what many people have had to deal with in this awful time, it's nothing. I came home to Shetland, and spent a happy year working on the wireless. I

was lucky. But now that things are opening up again, it really is time to go. November 15th is the date. If all goes to plan, by the time this is in print, I'll be in Moscow, trying to order tea with lemon, planning stories and trips around this huge country I've been dreaming about most of my adult life. Then I'll come home again, and write all about it.

## It might change your life

I would have liked to end this by encouraging teenagers to learn Russian at school like I did, but in an act of staggering stupidity, the Scottish Government scrapped it, so that's no longer an option. At a time when diplomacy and cultural understanding between Russia and the West are more crucial than ever, removing Russian from the national curriculum is extremely short-sighted. And it saddens me that bairns will now miss out on the chance to learn this beautiful, poetic, exciting language. At least online language tools mean anyone can start discovering Russian now - give it a try! It might change your life, as it changed mine.

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## Poems

### Da sailor's prayer

Praise be ta da Sea, wir deep an plentiful larder.  
Wir kist o invisible riches, a blink o siller runnin white below.  
A constant shiftin beneath wir feet, dis desert o waater  
endless an oot o sicht ower blind horizon's curve.

We laeve wir wives an bairns at hom, ta winder at wis  
sae mesmerized an infatuated by wir Ocean's mistress.  
Kennin wan day shu nicht swally wis in a single glaep.  
A fickle fate decided by da heicht o da seeventh wave,  
by da winds o chance an da storms o consequence.

Gie me a star ta steer wis by,  
a blink o da sun ta set da chart wi  
an A'll bring wir cargo in ta safe harbour.

*James Sinclair*

### We watch the same plants grow and take comfort

In my garden  
storm tolerant plants grow  
or they perish.

I send them south  
to flourish  
in my mother's garden.

They never fail  
she says  
the plants you send.

Good, may they grow  
rampant  
as love.

*Gabrielle Barnby*